THIRST
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 63:1–8
Isaiah 55:1–9
Luke 11:5–13

"My soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you."
Psalm 63:1 (NRSV)

Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised;
great is thy power, and of thy wisdom there is no end.
And man, being part of thy creation, desires to praise thee. . . .
Thou movest us to delight in praising thee, for thou hast formed us for thyself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee. . . .
Those who seek shall find him, and those who find him shall praise him.
Let me seek thee, Lord, in calling on thee, and call on thee in believing in thee. . .
O Lord, my faith calls on thee—that faith which thou has imparted to me,
which thou has breathed into me through the incarnation of thy Son.

The Confessions of St. Augustine
Augustine, Bishop of Hippo
354–430 A.D.

You and I are a problem of sorts to a school of academics called evolutionary biologists. We are an anomaly. What we did this morning does not compute. If, as the evolutionary biologists believe, our deepest drives and instincts and motives have to do with survival and preservation, then our being here this morning doesn't make much sense. If the instinct to protect and preserve and survive is built deeply into our DNA over millions of years of evolution, then getting out of bed this morning, with one hour less sleep, getting dressed up and making our way to church, doing something we literally do not have to do, and then making matters infinitely more complicated by reaching into our purses, wallets, and checkbooks and giving away resources with which we might preserve and protect our lives or at least amuse and entertain ourselves drives some scientists crazy. It makes no sense at all.

Zhu Da Fang illustrates the phenomenon. Mr. Da Fang is seventy-four years old and lives with his son in China. He is a Christian, Roman Catholic. He spent seven years of his life in prison and forced labor camps, because for decades the communist regime in China considered his religion to be counterrevolutionary, disloyal, and a danger to the state. Mr. Da Fang is very sick now, struggling with Parkinson's disease, confined to his bed but greatly comforted by rosaries, crucifixes, icons—symbols of his faith. "We don't hate anyone," he says, "and I have no regrets. One must try not to focus on the hardships you endure for faith" (*New York Times*, 4 March 2007).

If self-preservation is built deeply in us, Mr. Da Fang's behavior makes no sense—and he is a major puzzle to evolutionary anthropology—nor does the behavior of the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the thousands upon thousands of men and women who gave up their lives rather than deny their faith.

I discovered Mr. Da Fang in a fascinating report on the phenomenal resurgence of religion in China, a phenomenon historians are going to be pondering for centuries. After decades of persecution, during the Cultural Revolution churches and seminaries were closed, clergy imprisoned or executed, known Christians barred from universities and jobs, hounded, arrested, interned in forced labor camps—all of it the product of a rigid and determined Marxism that regards religion as irrational, a waste of resources, "the opiate of the masses." China began to change. Religious freedom was tentatively tried and extended. Churches and temples and mosques were restored and reopened. You still can't be a party member if you are publicly religious, which means there are many jobs and positions not open, but you no longer will be arrested for belonging to one of the five officially designated religions.

An amazing thing is happening. After decades of official opposition and persecution, 400 million Chinese are now openly religious, 32 percent of the population over sixteen. It is common now to see the elderly, the grandparents, taking their grandchildren to church or temple or mosque, teaching the precious rituals and practices they have been secretly observing for decades.

The article reminded me of one of the most moving experiences I have ever witnessed. We were official Presbyterian observers to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia, in 1991. The Chinese Christian Church was an important part of the formation of the World Council after the Second World War. The Chinese Protestant church was the product of missionary activity for more than a century and a half, since the 1830s, much of it Presbyterian, and its leaders were strong, faithful, and well-known in ecumenical circles throughout the world. When

China became communist in the late forties, that all changed; the church went underground. No news escaped. No communication with other churches, nothing but silence. Presbyterian mission workers, including a dear friend and colleague of mine, Arthur Romig, were expelled or arrested. The world simply assumed that Chinese Christianity had slowly but surely declined to the point of simply disappearing. I remember long discussions with Art Romig about the village and church in which he had served, the people he knew and had baptized and married. He concluded that it must all be gone. But then, fifty years later, as controls were relaxed and communication became possible, the Chinese church reemerged. When it went underground, losing its church buildings, schools, seminaries, hospitals, in 1948 it numbered about 700,000. But now, half a century later, it emerged from persecution three million strong. Today estimates vary, but most agree there are more than five million Chinese Christians, perhaps many more, in secret house churches.

At that assembly in Canberra, Bishop K. H. Ting, one of the young ecumenical leaders of the Chinese church at the organization of the Council in 1948 and who hadn't been seen or heard from since, was introduced. He was a pastor, scholar, leader, and President of Nanjing Seminary. In 1949, the government closed the seminary, destroyed the library, forced Bishop Ting to attend the Red Guard's political education classes, and made him into a bookkeeper in a fertilizer factory. Now an elderly man, still the leader of the Chinese Christian church, three million strong, he walked slowly across the platform, stopping to shake hands and embrace other Christian leaders from around the world whom he had last seen forty-five years before. There were plenty of tears. It was a moment I will not forget.

> O God, you are my God, I seek you,

the psalmist wrote.

> My soul thirsts for you;
> my flesh faints for you,
> as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. . . .
> Your steadfast love is better than life.

There is something about us that seems to make no biological sense at all, something deep within us that not only does not compute, but that the most determined power in the world cannot eradicate or defeat. What is it? Where did it come from?

The question was raised and explored in a *New York Times Magazine* article last Sunday, with the title "Why Do We Believe?" on the cover in big bold white letters against a black sky full of tiny swirling dots. What preacher could resist reading that article? I didn't. The article's subtitle

was “Darwin’s God: In the world of evolutionary biology, the question is not whether God exists but why we believe in [God]?” The article introduced me to a new academic discipline, evolutionary religious studies, which focuses on the question of why human beings believe.

There are three popular best-sellers out there at the moment that argue that not only is there no God but that religion is a residue of primitive civilizations, an irrational, unhelpful, and dangerous aberration. The authors are Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion;* Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell;* and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith.*

The authors call themselves neo-atheists and based on scientific rationalism think we should be embarrassed to say we believe. Dawkins is particularly exercised by the religious education of children, which he calls a form of child abuse and recommends state intervention to protect children from their parents’ beliefs.

One of the many critics of the books, Sam Schulman, editor of the *American* magazine, says that there is nothing new here, nothing that you didn’t hear in your freshman dormitory. And he faults the scientists for not even acknowledging that the question of God and religious belief has engaged the minds of the very best thinkers in Western civilization all the way back to the ancient Greeks, John Milton, Isaac Newton, Dante, Albert Einstein (*Context,* March 2007).

The problem for the scientist is that religious belief has “no obvious benefit for survival.” In fact, religion is regularly a costly thing. People give their resources, sacrifice even. Because they believe, people stand up and object to the authorities, make themselves unpopular, get arrested, go to jail. Because they believe, people sometimes do the unthinkable—lay down their lives.

The article concluded by posing the question “Are the nonbelievers right, and is religion at its core an empty undertaking, a misdirection, a vestigial artifact of a primitive mind? Or are the believers right, and does the fact that we have the mental capacity for discerning God, suggest that it was God who put it there? In short, are we hardwired to believe in God?”

It is a fascinating question. The haunting Sixty-Third Psalm weighs in with the image of thirst, one of the most elemental of our needs. The Hebrews were a desert people. They knew and lived with arid dryness, in which thirst was a common experience and water to drink was the most precious life-giving, life-sustaining element. Metaphors of thirst, dryness, fainting were common and powerful. And so the psalmist uses those powerful images to make an important point about human beings—namely an

elemental, basic need for God, yearning for God, longing for God, thirsting for God, as basic to us, as real in us, as our thirst and our need for water:

> O God, you are my God, I seek you,
> my soul thirsts for you; . . .
> as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

The prophet Isaiah picks up the theme in similar images:

> Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
> and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

But then the prophet raises an interesting point:

> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
> and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

That is a question that has a contemporary ring to it. Why do you waste resources on that which does not sustain life and answer your deepest need?

In a fine new book, *The Geography of God*, Michael Lindvall cites British journalist Bernard Levin, who wrote, “Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire—and yet lead lives of quiet . . . desperation, understanding nothing but the fact that there is a hole inside them however much food and drink they pour into it; however many motor cars and television sets they stuff into it . . . it aches” (p.8).

For some reason that paragraph reminded me of the sad pictures of Britney Spears in the *Tribune* last week, head shaved, looking so lost and forlorn, life out of control, in and out of rehab, and the frenzied media coverage of the sad life and death of Anna Nicole Smith, who had everything and nothing. I have no argument here, just an observation that you can have a lot and still be hungry and thirsty and that just perhaps you cannot fill the hole in your heart by yourself.

The psalmist proposes that we are created with the capacity for belief and trust in God built into us, that thirst and need for God is as natural to us as our thirst and need for water.

A long time ago St. Augustine put it beautifully: “Thou hast made us for thyself . . . and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee.”

There is a God-shaped hole in every human heart, the philosopher Pascal said.

And C. S. Lewis, reflecting on the long, slow process by which he came to faith: “We have within us a life-long nostalgia, a longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off” (*Weavings,* July/August 2000).

In the *Times* article about evolutionary biology and the new atheism, Justin Barrett was cited. He is an evolutionary biologist who also happens to be a Christian. He said, “Christian theology teaches that people were crafted by God to be in a loving relationship with him and with other people. Why wouldn’t God, then, design us in such a way as to find belief in divinity quite natural?” (“Why Do We Believe?” *New York Times,* 4 March 2007).

You may be an anomaly by being here in church on this Sunday morning. But you came to the right place.

Here we gather around the idea, which we believe is God’s truth, that God has created the need for God, that thirst in us, that our need for God is a precious part of our humanity.

Here we gather around the truth for which we are all seeking, searching, looking, longing—for beauty, for meaning, for community, for love, thirsting for God.

Here we gather around the proposition that we believe is God’s truth: that Jesus Christ, his birth and life, his teaching and healing, his suffering and dying, is the living water to quench our God-given thirst.

“Ask,” he said, “and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.”

Thomas Merton, who thought so deeply and profoundly about the phenomenon of human spirituality, once said, “We cannot find God unless we know we need God.”

And so we come, to ask and search and knock, to express the thirst and need and longing for God that is in us.

And we come here weekly to claim the promise that in Jesus Christ our thirst is satisfied.

Mary Oliver is a distinguished American poet whose poems increasingly reflect her own faith journey and experience. When her partner of forty years died recently, she wrote poems about seeking God, thirsting for and occasionally finding—or being found by—God. One of them she called “Thirst”:

Another morning and I wake with thirst for the goodness I do not have.
I walk out to the pond and all the way God has given us such beautiful lessons. Oh
Lord, I was never a quick scholar but sulked and hunched over my books past the
hour and the bell; grant me, in your mercy, a little more time.
Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my
heart. Who knows what will finally happen or where I will be sent, yet already I
have given a great many things away, expecting to be told to pack nothing, except
the prayers which, with this thirst, I am slowly learning.
(*Thirst*, 2006, p.69)

And so, if you are thirsty, if there is a hole in your heart, if there is an ache in your spirit, an empty space that refuses to be filled no matter how hard you try, you might consider the possibility that God created that space, that emptiness, that thirst in you to make you human. You might stop the desperate effort to fill it, heal it, satisfy it, and quietly invite Jesus Christ, the love of God incarnate, to come, to take up residence there, in your heart. It is a place in you and me and every one of us that God made—for him.

"O God, I seek you," the ancient psalmist wrote, a prayer we might claim as our own this morning.

My soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land when there is no water. . . .
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live.

Amen.